

*Note: If you are not familiar with this story,
go to the end of this article and read the text before you continue.*

INTRODUCTION

Jephthah has long been the basis for lively discussions in Bible classes. He was called a *mighty brave man—a mighty warrior*. His father was a distinguished Hebrew named Gilead, and his mother was a foreigner and a prostitute. Because he was an illegitimate child, Jephthah was driven away from home by his half-brothers who didn't want to share their inheritance with him. Apparently Jephthah had leadership qualities because he had quite a following and became known in the regions roundabout. When war broke out at home, the leaders of the land of Gilead begged him to come and lead their army against the enemy. By then he had one child—a daughter, whom he loved immensely. At a point of intense conflict, Jephthah made a vow that if God would help him and his people conquer the enemy, when he returned home he would sacrifice to the Lord whatever first came out of his house to meet him.

The Lord was with Jephthah and his troops defeated the Ammonites and took over their towns. When Jephthah returned home, who came out the door first to meet him? His beloved daughter. Herein lies the age old controversy: Did she die on the altar as a burnt sacrifice because of her father's vow?

Did Jephthah sacrifice his daughter?

by Caroline Karl

The story of Jephthah provides a demonstration of the faith and confidence that one should have in God as Guide, Protector and Deliverer of His children. It also shows that family, neighbors, or fellow countrymen should rise up to help one another in times of need. Those who do not respond in such a way will not share in the success of the others.

In his message to the Ammorite King, Jephthah clearly outlines the innocence of Israel 300 years earlier. He points out that after asking for and being denied permission to pass through certain countries, the Israelites took a different route. They engaged in battle only after an Ammorite attack. It was through this God-given victory that Israel gained the land in question. Jephthah argues that since it was God who drove out the Ammorites from that land, who were they to demand it back. He also challenged them (with a little bit of sarcasm) to possess whatever their god, Chemosh, gave them. The Ammorite King's disregard of this message led to their defeat. Before the battle, Jephthah promised to give to the Lord "whatever" came out of his house first upon his victorious return.

To the casual reader Jephthah's vow and fulfillment of the vow may cause some difficulties. Nevertheless, with a little research and thought, one recognizes that his vow is not as troublesome as previously supposed. Modern readers assume that the phrase "whatever comes out of the house" refers to animals and that Jephthah never expected a person to exit the house. This does fit into our modern ways, but not necessarily biblical ones. It was common for homes

of the day to be surrounded by a courtyard where donkeys, sheep and goats may have been kept.¹ Perhaps Jephthah's house was just such a one. Perhaps he expected to see an animal, a lamb or cow, come out of the house upon his return. Adam Clarke states "The translation, according to the most accurate Hebrew scholars, is this: 'I will consecrate it to the Lord, or I will offer it for a burnt offering;' that is, 'If it be a thing fit for a burnt offering, it shall be made one; if fit for the service of God, it shall be consecrated to him.'"² An example of this would be a dog. If a dog, an unclean animal had exited the house, would Jephthah have offered it as a burnt offering? According to Mosaic Law, he could not have. Therefore, it is unthinkable that Jephthah actually would have burned his daughter on an altar in the name of the Lord. This was expressly forbidden in Leviticus 18:21³ and Deuteronomy 12:31.⁴ It is doubtful that the Lord would have rebuked King David for lesser sin (sending a man to his doom in the frontlines of battle) and neglected to rebuke Jephthah for directly offering a human sacrifice in His name. Some may argue that this is a repetition of Abraham's offering of Isaac. However, by providing the ram in that case the Lord made it very clear that He did not desire human sacrifice. Furthermore, II Kings 3:4-27 cites human sacrifice made to the pagan god, Chemosh. In the light of Jephthah's mockery of this god, it hardly seems plausible that he would duplicate such a ritual to the One True God.

The most logical explanation is that Jephthah's daughter entered into some kind of service for the Lord, perhaps as one of the women who served at the doorway of the tabernacle mentioned in Exodus 38:8⁵ and I Samuel 2:22.⁶ This would explain why she never had "relations with a man." Because these women spent their time serving at the tabernacle, they could not have had time for marriage, children, and housekeeping. Thus, it can be assumed that these women were unmarried. This is supported further in I Samuel 2:22 as it is unlikely that Eli's sons would have had sexual relations with the tabernacle women had they been married. It is possible that, as children, these women were dedicated to serve the Lord as Samuel was.

Jephthah's sorrow at seeing his daughter exit the house was due to the realization that his only child would remain childless and his lineage would die with her. Her sorrow came from the realization that she would never be able have the things that all Israelite women most wanted: to

¹ Thompson, J.A. *Handbook of Life in Biblical Times*. U.S.A.: InterVarsity Press, 1986. P. 59

² Clarke, Adam. *The Holy Bible with A Commentary and Critical Notes*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, c. 1940. P. 278

³ *Then he washed the entrails and the legs in water. And Moses burned the whole ram on the altar. It was a burnt sacrifice for a sweet aroma, an offering made by fire to the LORD, as the LORD had commanded Moses.* Lev 8:21 (NKJV)

⁴ *You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.* Deut 12:31 (NKJV)

⁵ *He made the laver of bronze and its base of bronze, from the bronze mirrors of the serving women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.* Ex 38:8 (NKJV)

⁶ *Now Eli was very old; and he heard everything his sons did to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.* 1 Sam 2:22 (NKJV)

marry and have children. Some scholars believe that she spent the two months in the mountains visiting her companions in their own houses and that her commemoration involved nothing more than Israelite virgins visiting her at the tabernacle four days a year.⁷

Jephthah is mentioned in Hebrews 11 because of his faith in God and service to Israel. His bold message to the Ammorite king demonstrated his confidence in the Lord and His protection and favor for Israel. He was confident that the Ammorites had no authority, right, or power to win the battle. When the position discussed above is considered, it is obvious that his daughter's situation did not reflect negatively on her father's legacy of faith. The scriptures confirm that it is totally inconsistent with the nature of God and the Law of God to think that Jephthah's daughter was offered as a burnt offering.

Our guest contributor this month is Yvonne's daughter, Caroline.



Caroline writes: "My parents began pastoring when I was two years old and at three my mom helped me pray to ask Jesus to "come into my heart." As a boy in post-WWII East Germany, my father and his family were persecuted for their faith. Those experiences made his faith stronger and he insisted that we have devotions every morning. When we were young, he read a story to us from the Egermeier's Bible Story Book. As we got older, we read from the Bible. After reading, we all knelt down at our couch and took turns praying. It was during these times that the Lord made Himself real to me."

Caroline graduated at 16 from New Life Christian Academy in Westland, Michigan and went on to earn a Bachelor of Music degree in Music Education from the University of Michigan. Upon graduation, she moved to Atlanta, Georgia where she taught elementary orchestra in the inner

⁷ Clarke, Adam. *The Holy Bible with A Commentary and Critical Notes*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, c. 1940. P. 279

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city for five years. While in Atlanta, she directed the choir at her church, started a 20's singles group and earned a Master of Music Education degree from the University of Georgia-Athens. For the past three years, she has been teaching elementary and high school orchestra fulltime in Livonia, Michigan, and is enrolled in Michigan Theological Seminary.

The text for this study

Judges 11 (The Bible in Basic English)

¹ Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a great man of war; he was the son of a loose woman, and Gilead was his father. ² And Gilead's wife gave birth to sons, and when her sons became men, they sent Jephthah away, saying, You have no part in the heritage of our father's house, for you are the son of another woman. ³ So Jephthah went in flight from his brothers and was living in the land of Tob, where a number of good-for-nothing men, joining Jephthah, went out with him on his undertakings. ⁴ Now after a time the children of Ammon made war against Israel. ⁵ And when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the responsible men of Gilead went to get Jephthah back from the land of Tob; ⁶ And they said to Jephthah, Come and be our chief so that we may make war against the children of Ammon. ⁷ But Jephthah said to the responsible men of Gilead, Did you not, in your hate for me, send me away from my father's house? Why do you come to me now when you are in trouble? ⁸ And the responsible men of Gilead said to Jephthah, That is the reason we have come back to you; so go with us and make war against the children of Ammon, and we will make you our head over all the people of Gilead. ⁹ Then Jephthah said to the responsible men of Gilead, If you take me back to make war against the children of Ammon, and if with the help of the Lord I overcome them, will you make me your head? ¹⁰ And the responsible men of Gilead said to Jephthah, May the Lord be our witness: we will certainly do as you say.

¹¹ So Jephthah went with the responsible men of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah said all these things before the Lord in Mizpah. ¹² Then Jephthah sent men to the king of the children of Ammon, saying, What have you against me that you have come to make war against my land? ¹³ And the king of the children of Ammon said to the men sent by Jephthah, Because Israel, when he came up out of Egypt, took away my land, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok and as far as Jordan: so now, give me back those lands quietly. ¹⁴ And Jephthah sent again to the king of the children of Ammon, ¹⁵ And said to him, This is the word of Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the children of Ammon; ¹⁶ But when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the waste land to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh; ¹⁷ Then Israel sent men to the king of Edom saying, Let me now go through your land; but the king of Edom did not give ear to them. And in the same way he sent to the king of Moab, but he would not; so Israel went on living in Kadesh. ¹⁸ Then he went on through the waste land and round the land of Edom and the land of Moab, and came by the east side of the land of Moab, and put up their tents on the other side of the Arnon; they did not come inside the limit of Moab, for the Arnon was the limit of Moab. ¹⁹ And Israel sent men to Sihon, king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, Let me now go through your land to my place. ²⁰ But Sihon would not give way and let Israel go through his land; and Sihon got together all his people, and put his army in position in Jahaz, and made war on Israel. ²¹ And the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hands of Israel, and they overcame them; so all the land of the Amorites, the people of that land, became Israel's. ²² All the limit of the Amorites was theirs, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok and from the waste land even to Jordan.

²³ So now the Lord, the God of Israel, has taken away their land from the Amorites and given it to his people Israel; are you then to have it? ²⁴ Do you not keep the lands of those whom Chemosh your god sends out from before you? So we will keep all the lands of those whom the Lord our God sends out from before us. ²⁵ What! are you any better than Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever take up a cause against Israel or make war against them? ²⁶ While Israel was living in Heshbon and its daughter-towns and in Aroer and its daughter-towns and in all the towns which are by the side of the Arnon, for three hundred years, why did you not get them back at that time? ²⁷ So I have done no wrong against you, but you are doing wrong to me in fighting against me: may the Lord, who is Judge this day, be judge between the children of Israel and the children of Ammon. ²⁸ The king of the children of Ammon, however, did not give ear to the words which Jephthah sent to him.

²⁹ Then the spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah, and he went through Gilead and Manasseh, and came to Mizpeh of Gilead; and from Mizpeh of Gilead he went over to the children of Ammon. ³⁰ And Jephthah took an oath to the Lord, and said, If you will give the children of Ammon into my hands, ³¹ Then whoever comes out from the door of my house, meeting me when I come back in peace from the children of Ammon, will be the Lord's and I will give him as a burned offering. ³² So Jephthah went over to the children of Ammon to make war on them; and the Lord

gave them into his hands. ³³ And he made an attack on them from Aroer all the way to Minnith, overrunning twenty towns, as far as Abel-cheramim, and put great numbers to the sword. So the children of Ammon were crushed before the children of Israel.

³⁴ Then Jephthah came back to his house in Mizpah, and his daughter came out, meeting him on his way with music and with dances; she was his only child; he had no other sons or daughters. ³⁵ And when he saw her he was overcome with grief, and said, Ah! my daughter! I am crushed with sorrow, and it is you who are the chief cause of my trouble; for I have made an oath to the Lord and I may not take it back. ³⁶ And she said to him, My father, you have made an oath to the Lord; do then to me whatever you have said; for the Lord has sent a full reward on your haters, on the children of Ammon. ³⁷ Then she said to her father, Only do this for me: let me have two months to go away into the mountains with my friends, weeping for my sad fate. ³⁸ And he said, Go then. So he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends to the mountains, weeping for her sad fate. ³⁹ And at the end of two months she went back to her father, who did with her as he had said in his oath: and she had never been touched by a man. So it became a rule in Israel, ⁴⁰ For the women to go year by year sorrowing for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in every year.